Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism

Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society

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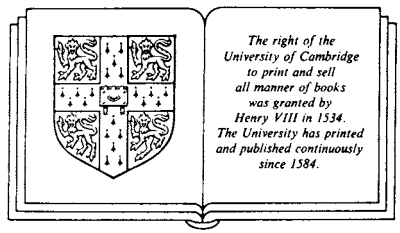

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An Introduction to Religion in Eighteenth-Century Political Culture

The study of religion in the field of eighteenth-century English politics is beginning to enjoy a renaissance. One colloquy on Hanoverian England involving seven specialists reached the consensus that religion was of 'vast importance' to the politics of the period.[1] More recent investigations have also appealed for renewed attention to religion, and valuable work on Nonconformity in the electorate and Anglican political theory is currently emerging.[2] The increasing awareness of the importance of religion arises from its close relation to a wide variety of topics, including the origins of English radicalism, the longstanding debate over party politics, and the role of class in the emergence of modern society. With respect to the first topic, the impact of Nonconformity on pro-Americanism and on the evolution of political radicalism has not been adequately appreciated. To this date, the ideology of the Nonconformists has

1 John Cannon (ed.), *The Whig Ascendancy* (New York, 1981), pp. 192–3. No major study of eighteenth-century Nonconformity has appeared since the publication of Anthony Lincoln's *Some Political and Social Ideas of English Dissent, 1763–1800* (Cambridge, 1938).

2 John Phillips, *Electoral Behavior in Unreformed England: Plumpers, Splitters, and Straights* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 287, 293, 296, 305; J. A. W. Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property: The Process of Self-Recognition in Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Kingston and Montreal, 1983), pp. 164–85; J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 31, 43, 195, 320, 375. The term Nonconformity is interchangeable with Dissent and embraced the Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Baptist denominations. Sometimes Quakers were included in this designation. Little attention will be given in this study to the distinction between Particular (Calvinistic) and General (Arminian) Baptists, or to the Presbyterian drift into Unitarianism; the only Quaker community studied here is that of the Bristol Friends. The major points of difference between the denominations related to polity, where the Presbyterians differed from the Congregationalists and Baptists, and to baptism, where the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists were aligned against the Baptists. These differences seemed insignificant, however, when the denominations were confronted with the restrictive legislation of the Cavalier Parliament. For theology see C. Gordon Bolam et al., *The English Presbyterians from Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism* (Boston, 1968); W. C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1961). For the colonies, see William Cathcart, *The Baptists and the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1876); Arthur J. Mekeel, *The Relation of the Quakers to the American Revolution* (Washington, 1979).

only been accounted for at the level of the history of ideas, and the question of the place of ideology in relation to economic factors has not been sufficiently examined. The relationship of the Dissenters' social status to the purported oppressive nature of the law has never been studied; in fact, while the contribution of religion to radicalism is often assumed, the entire social question has received only the most superficial attention.

The debate over party in the eighteenth century centers around the question of political principles in relation to organized party continuity. The Dissenters were faithful government supporters in the first half of the century and were viewed by virtually all observers alike as quintessential Whigs. The purported uniformity of their reaction to the government's American policy in the 1770s therefore raises the issue of party continuity in an acute form. Whig historians made Nonconformity the linchpin for their argument that during the 'Tory' years of the reign of George III the 'Whig party' maintained its integrity through the leadership of the Rockinghams at the top, and the Dissenting voters at the bottom. Modern research has effectively demolished the notion of a revived Tory party, but the religious component of a perceived resurgence of authoritarianism in Church and State requires further investigation. The study of Whig historiography in its religious dimension may also contribute to the debate over a deferential versus a participatory model of politics, and it necessitates a discussion of the connection between local issues and national politics.

A fresh examination of religion during the American Revolution will reveal new and abiding divisions in English society, both religious and economic, and these fissures may inform the question of social class and help explain the slow evolution of democracy. While there was no rebellion in England, the populace was sufficiently stirred by events in the colonies to expose the lineaments of society to our view. Through the study of religion and such expressions of resistance to government policy as public petitions, we can discern lines of cohesion in some social groups and divisions between others. For example, in times of political disturbance one might expect to find a strong affinity between those in the legal profession and the clergy of the Established Church, and yet historians of Nonconformity have seldom appreciated the importance of these connections.[3] The common threat of Nonconformity at home and rebellion in the colonies brought the shared interests of law and the Established Church vividly to light, and to many urban artisans, the new expressed unity of these elite groups appeared to be especially threatening. But why did the divisions usually remain latent, and what were the underlying social forces that kept some interest groups united? Part of the answer lies in the religion that was so central to eighteenth-century England.

3 Historically, lawyers and clergymen have not always acted together, but on the structural unity of the interests they represent, see the preface to the *Journal of Law and Religion* 1 (1983), by Michael Scherschlight and Wilson Yates.

In the period of the American Revolution, some segments of English society, albeit a minority, contested contemporary perceptions of a hierarchical religious and social order. This study will demonstrate that in addition to the Nonconformists, there were a substantial number of Anglicans who opposed the government, and since political disaffection transcended denominational distinctions, it is not possible to construe Anglican orthodoxy as a monolith in support of the State. The study of this minority, however, is not intended to be understood as offering an interpretation of English society as a whole; although such a survey will illumine one principal cause of social change, it will place the establishment in Church and State in a slightly different and more ominous light than traditional accounts, and it will reveal new elements of freedom and flexibility within the social order. In short, the study of Nonconformity in the eighteenth century provides new evidence for the open-ended structure of society that sets England apart from other nations of Europe.[4] The three topics of radicalism, party continuity, and social divisions will each require considerable elaboration, and throughout the following discussion the competing themes of political independence and deference, religious and economic motivation, and local and national issues will be highlighted.[5]

A fourth concern of this study is the perennial question of the relation between ideology, motivation, and political behavior. The issue of the causative role of ideas is an integral part of each of the three major themes of the book. In the debate over party, one must distinguish between the mental reality of party, the language of party, and actual party organizations, but the connections between these facets of corporate political action also require attention. Similarly, in the evolution of radical opposition, the rhetoric of the leaders and the perceptions and fears of their opponents are important aspects of the radicals' self-understanding and behavior. Finally, in the ongoing debate over class and class consciousness, one must have constant recourse to the distinction between the discourse of class on the one hand, and the actual class, or class-like divisions in society, on the other. In a small number of urban settings it is possible to bring together evidence that reveals both the ideological orientation and the political behavior of a sizeable minority of people and we can thereby examine in some detail the interdependence of eighteenth-century political and religious ideas and political action.

4 On this highly debated issue compare C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford, 1962), and Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1981), who find more openness than Lawrence and Jeanne C. Fawter Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1984), John Cannon, *Aristocratic Century: The Peerage of Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1984), and Clark, *English Society*.

5 H. James Henderson, 'Quantitative Approaches to Party Formation in the United States Congress: A Comment', *WMQ*, 3rd ser., 30 (1973), 307 for helpful statements concerning the need for caution when using dichotomous classification.

The word religion is used in this study to denote a phenomenon that is much broader than doctrine or theology. Beliefs about God may be neither clearly formulated nor faithfully adhered to, and in this inchoate form they are often of secondary importance to politics; where religion influences political behavior, habit and convention are often more important than doctrine. Religion, to be sure, refers to conviction, but convictions are sometimes held without a clear or convincing rational basis.[6] The Dissenters, however, were extremely clear on two pivotal doctrines: the authority of the Bible as against the authority of tradition, and the nature of the gathered Church as independent from the Establishment. Christians of all denominations shared certain basic assumptions about these doctrines, but the Dissenters' distinctive emphases gave their teachings special relevance with regard to both their self-identity and their political behavior. The Dissenters' congregational polity provided a longstanding and abiding orientation against a hierarchical conception of society; their more egalitarian religious practice anticipated by many years their radical opposition to political oppression. When at length they turned against the government, the Dissenters claimed to derive their authority directly from God and his revealed Word, as well as their ecclesiastical tradition. While some so-called 'rational' Dissenters derived their political views in part from their heterodox theology, the common heritage of a radically separated ecclesiastical polity was controlling for both the 'rational' and the orthodox alike.

The strength of the Dissenters' conviction is accounted for at one level by the human capacity to attach values to God, God's 'revelation', or 'eternal' truth.[7] But the Dissenters' political convictions were also held firmly because of their experience of legal repression; in many locales they were excluded from the inner circles of power. The Dissenters' distinctive experience in legal, social, and political matters thus interacted with theological and ecclesiological principles, and the product was far more potent than private religious beliefs. A Dissenter need not have been particularly pious or theologically acute for his religion to have had a profound impact on his politics. Religion should not be reduced to social causes, but as James Obelkevich has said, it is unintelligible apart from them.[8] The religion of the Dissenters is therefore understood in this

6 The ideological roots to Dissenting politics are both secular and religious; many Dissenting ministers were indebted to Locke, and most of them praised his work, but Locke himself was heavily indebted to religion. See John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 51, 121, 207, 213. In addition, the Dissenters' specific political convictions were also informed directly by reading the Bible, as we shall see in chap. 4 below.

7 See Bruce Lincoln, 'Notes Toward a Theory of Religion and Revolution', in Bruce Lincoln (ed.), *Religion, Rebellion, Revolution* (New York, 1985), pp. 266–8 for a good recent review of the sociology of religion.

8 James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825–1875* (Oxford, 1976), p. 313. George Rudé's seminal *Ideology and Popular Protest* (New York, 1980), pp. 13–38 provides a theoretical framework for my understanding of the relationship between theology (Rudé's 'inherent ideas') and self-identity related to the social setting

study as a set of firmly held convictions about the nature of moral and political authority; these convictions differed from other people's political convictions by their deep grounding in different ecclesiastical, political, and social experience.

The concept of revolution as an explanatory device is as controversial as the concept of religion, but it is used in this study merely as the conventional means of referring to the colonial events of 1765–83. Recently, scholars have examined the distinction between revolution and rebellion with fruitful results.[9] There were scattered episodes of disorderly behavior in England, including riots and strikes, but clearly the nation did not experience anything approximating a classic revolution. If, however, eighteenth-century English Dissenters never advocated an armed uprising and never overtly rebelled, their thought and actions were deemed rebellious by many observers, and they did contribute directly to the evolution of radical ideology and the development of advanced political methods; strictly speaking, they manifested the characteristics of a religion of resistance rather than a religion of revolution. The terms 'radical' and 'radically' were used in the eighteenth century in the sense of going to the root of things, and the words were applied both to political ideas and political structures. Clearly, then, if ideas can be described as 'radical', we can speak without anachronism of the origins of English 'radicalism', though to be sure, the latter term only emerged in the nineteenth century. The Dissenting ministers and their congregations were genuinely radical insofar as they sought to reveal the root of contemporary problems by locating the source of their difficulties in what they considered the oppressive social and political structures of Hanoverian England.[10]

('derived ideas') and the way the two converge to form popular ideologies.

9 Lincoln, 'Notes Toward a Theory', pp. 268–81. J. C. D. Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 3–4 prefers rebellion over revolution, and suggests that even during the American crisis there was little that was genuinely revolutionary in English politics, pp. 97–8.

10 I utilize here the rather loose, contextualized understanding of radicalism as the ideology of the excluded who seek to change existing political structures. John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 19–20. Brewer's work on the emergence of radical activity in the 1760s is the best general treatment of the early period; see also his 'English Radicalism in the Age of George III', in J. G. A. Pocock (ed.), *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 338–9. For earlier, sporadic Tory radical activity and ideology see Marie Peters, 'The "Monitor" on the Constitution, 1755–65: New Light on the Ideological Origins of English Radicalism', *EHR*, 86 (1971), 706–27; Linda Colley, 'Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism Before Wilkes', *TRHS*, 5th ser., 31 (1981), 1–19, esp. pp. 15–16 on the radical Tory contribution to Wilkite radicalism; and H. T. Dickinson, 'The Precursors of Political Radicalism in Augustan Britain', pp. 63–84 in Clyve Jones (ed.), *Britain in the First Age of Party, 1680–1750: Essays Presented to Geoffrey Holmes* (London, 1987), who examines recent literature. For the complexity of the synthesis of Wilkite radicalism and the breakdown of religious continuities, see Philip Jenkins, 'Jacobites and Freemasons in Eighteenth-Century Wales', *Welsh History Review* 9 (1979), 399–404; for social continuities with the 1740s, see Nicholas Rogers, 'Aristocratic Clientage, Trade, and Independency: Popular Politics in Pre-Radical West-

Nonconformity, however, was not a unified movement and neither was radicalism.[11] The majority of Dissenters were clearly pro-American in orientation, but many were evidently indifferent to political matters, and a few were outspoken defenders of the government's American policy. Similarly, while historians continue to disagree over the nature, extent, and significance of radicalism, they have increasingly come to recognize the complexity of the movements between 1760 and 1790, their loose associations, and the diverse motives and aims of the leaders. Some studies, for example, have emphasized the ideological and religious motivation of radicals, while others have greatly illumined the social and economic context of radicalism.[12] This book does examine unifying themes and structures, but it makes no attempt to survey the entire variety of opinion and movements within the broad, complex, and sometimes contradictory history of radicalism. The focus, instead, is upon the contribution of urban Dissent to a form of radicalism that reached deeply into the ranks of skilled urban artisans. Though religion is the primary concern of these pages, the quantitative data from the petitions and addresses provides confirmation of the qualitative evidence adduced by John Brewer and others on the social and political fissures that were opening afresh in the 1760s and 1770s.

minster', *P&P* 61 (1973), 70–106.

11 I began to document the diversity of Dissent in 'Whigs and Nonconformists: "Slumbering Radicalism" in English Politics, 1739–1789', *ECS* 9 (1975), 1–27; for the divisions of Dissent over specific issues see John Stephens, 'The London Ministers and Subscription, 1772–1779', *ED* 1 (1982), 50, 52, 54–5, 57; John Seed, 'Gentlemen Dissenters: The Social and Political Meanings of Rational Dissent in the 1770s and 1780s', *HJ* 28 (1985), 301, 323; and K. R. M. Short, 'The English Regium Donum', *EHR* 84 (1969), 63.

12 For ideology, see Colin Bonwick, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1977); and John Gascoigne, 'Anglican Latitudinarianism and Political Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century', *History* 71 (1986), 22–38; Clark claims to have gone deeper than others in locating a source of political disaffection in heterodoxy. See *English Society*, pp. 281, 292–3, 311, 332–3, 373–4, 378, 423, and J. C. D. Clark, 'On Hitting the Buffers: The Historiography of England's Ancien Regime. A Response', *P&P* 117 (1987), 204. But Clark and Gascoigne are only the most recent in a long line of scholars who have located the intellectual origins of radical ideas in heresy. Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (New York, 1968), pp. 335–56; Russell E. Richey, 'The Origins of British Radicalism: The Changing Rationale for Dissent', *ECS* 7 (1973–4), 191; Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York, 1973), p. 70; H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York, 1977), pp. 197-205; Donald Davie, 'Disaffection of the Dissenters under George III', pp. 347, 349 in Paul J. Korshin and Robert R. Allen (eds.), *Greene and Centennial Studies* (Charlottesville, 1984). This debate will be reviewed in a forthcoming article entitled 'The Ideological Origins of English Radicalism: Heresy, Orthodoxy, and Polity'. For more material motives, see Brewer, 'English Radicals in the Age of George III', especially pp. 334, 356; Brewer concentrates on the pervasive growth of credit, the changing nature of the tax burden, and the increasing importance of statute law.

NONCONFORMITY, PRO-AMERICANISM, AND THE EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH RADICALISM

The importance of Nonconformity for the origins of modern radicalism is now widely recognized. Anthony Lincoln's early intuitive insights on the genius of Dissenting thought were elaborated more fully by Caroline Robbins and worked out in detail by Colin Bonwick.[13] Bonwick demonstrated the profound influence of the American Revolution on both Nonconformity and the origins of English radicalism and fully analyzed the political thought of Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, James Burgh, and Newcome Cappe. The Dissenters were friends of America and advocates of parliamentary reform, but while they were 'radical', it is now clear that the majority were neither levelers nor republicans.[14] Historians commonly make a distinction between the old, Commonwealthman radicalism of the 1760s and 1770s, and the new, more thoroughgoing artisan radicalism of the 1790s; this categorization represents a 'major faultline' in the history of radicalism.[15] According to the prevailing conserva-

13 Lincoln, *Some Political and Social Ideas of English Dissent*; Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*; see the chap. 'The Contribution of Nonconformity', pp. 221–71; Colin Bonwick, 'English Dissenters and the American Revolution', in H. C. Allen and Roger Thompson (eds.), *Contrast and Connection: Bicentennial Essays in Anglo-American History* (Athens, Ohio, 1976), pp. 88–112; and *English Radicals*. On the influence of the American Revolution on English radicalism, see also Margaret and James Jacob (eds.), *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism* (London, 1984).

14 Bonwick led the way in this reinterpretation. See *English Radicals*, pp. 21–3, 53, 100, 101, 108; 'English Dissenters and the American Revolution', pp. 106–7, 109. For similar views, see Ian Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform* (London, 1962); and Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion*, pp. 97–8.

15 Bonwick, *English Radicals*, p. xxi. Bonwick distinguishes between (1) Commonwealthman radicals, (2) Wilkite radicals, (3) Bentham's Utilitarianism, and (4) Paine's working-class radicalism, *English Radicals*, p. xiv. Similarly, Brewer distinguishes between the Dissenters and the Commonwealthman tradition on the one hand, and the Society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights and the Wilkites on the other, 'English Radicalism', p. 343. The paradigm that contrasts the old radicalism of the Commonwealthmen and Wilkites with the new artisan radicalism of the 1790s is pervasive. See Bonwick, *English Radicals*, pp. ix, 18–19, 131–2, 134, 163, 216–19. Bonwick's thought is based on the standard studies of Simon Maccoby, *English Radicalism, 1786–1832* (London, 1955); Carl B. Cone, *The English Jacobins* (New York, 1968); E. C. Black, *The Association* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963); and John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640–1832* (Cambridge, 1973). On p. xiv Bonwick does say that Wilkism was a bridge between the Commonwealthman tradition and artisan radicalism, to the extent that Wilkes utilized Commonwealthman ideology and involved artisans. But the contrasts are emphasized over the connections. Recent studies accept this viewpoint. See Joseph O. Baylen and Norbert J. Gossman (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals* (London, 1979), pp. 2–3; Edward Royle and James Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers, 1760–1848* (Lexington, Ky., 1982), do a little with continuities, but still date 'the rise of popular radicalism' from the 1790s, pp. 48–9. Similarly, H. T. Dickinson sees contrasts in *Liberty and Property*, pp. 232, 240, and especially pp. 246–7, but observes some continuities in 'The Rights of Man in Britain: From the Levellers to the Utopian Socialists', pp. 78–9, 82–3 in Günter Birtsch (ed.), *Grund- und Freiheitsrechte von der ständischen zur spätbürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Göttingen, 1987). Clark, *English Society*, pp. 290–345. John Sainsbury, *Disaffected*

tive interpretation, Commonwealthman radicals were characterized by moderation, both with respect to their ideas and their political methods. Dissenters were middle and even upper class in orientation and defended the social stratification and hierarchical structure of English society. Since they were themselves persons of property, they 'shared the values of a socially differentiated community' and thereby had little to say about social inequality. They championed the legal and constitutional equality of right, were strongly loyal to the State, and were dedicated to working within its constitutional framework.[16]

Other historians have argued that radical ideology was more advanced and that its popular manifestations were more disruptive. The studies of George Rudé, John Brewer, and H. T. Dickinson departed from the more conservative interpretation by stressing the innovative aspects of the radicals' thought and the deeper social penetration of their views. H. T. Dickinson, for example, contrasted the radicalism of the 1760s in its extra-parliamentary character to the earlier Country opposition and emphasized the leaders' willingness to go further than the Revolution settlement. Like Bonwick, he relied on the most well-known intellectuals, but he found a more thoroughgoing radicalism in this period because he also examined newspapers, as did Brewer.[17] The regional and local studies of John Money, Nicholas Rogers, Peter Marshall, and Thomas Knox also revealed a more advanced and more influential radicalism, though these reassessments have dealt mostly with the radicalism associated with Wilkes, rather than the Dissenters and Commonwealthmen. The evidence adduced in the present study provides additional support for this second interpretation of radicalism.

Patriots: London Supporters of Revolutionary America 1769–1782 (Kingston and Montreal, 1987), having discussed the London artisans' radical activity, hints at the connections with the artisan radicalism of the 1790s, pp. 164–5.

16 Bonwick, *English Radicals*, pp. 243, 11, 15–18, 35, 47, 95, 124, 256, 260, 265; Clark, *English Society*, pp. 289–93; Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots*, pp. 80–2. The idea of a moderate religious influence in politics is also characteristic of studies of religion in the colonies. Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), p. 361, notes the moderation of the theologically liberal. See also Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982), p. 193, on the Baptists.

17 Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, pp. 195–6, 204–5. Much of the divergence of interpretation is related to the kind of evidence examined and whether the study focuses upon politics at court or popular politics. Compare, for example, Ian Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform*, with John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*, and more recently, Brewer, 'English Radicalism in the Age of George III', where he deals at length with the middling orders, with Ian Christie, *Wars and Revolutions, Britain: 1760–1815* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp. 63–79. Sainsbury finds socio-economic divisions in London, but argues that organized support for the colonies, with 'few exceptions' like Bristol, was confined to London, *Disaffected Patriots*, pp. 69, 164. Unfortunately, this book went into print with reference to only two books, and no articles, published since 1978; the studies of Thomas Knox, Peter Marshall, John Phillips, and Linda Colley are ignored, and John Money's studies are unassimilated. Ironically, these more sophisticated local studies have done the most to undermine the Namierian approach.